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Cross-ethnic Friendships and Sense of Social-Emotional Safety in a Multiethnic Middle School: An Exploratory Study

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This exploratory study examined whether cross-ethnic friendships are related to students' sense of social-emotional safety in a multiethnic middle school. The analysis sample ($n = 227$) consisted of Latino (57%) and White (43%) sixth- and seventh-grade students. Although a strong preference for same-ethnic friendships was found for both ethnic groups, Latino students felt safer than their White schoolmates. Even though the two groups did not differ in the number of cross-ethnic friendships, a greater number of cross-ethnic friendships were associated with a stronger sense of safety only among Latino students both concurrently and over time. The implications of current findings are discussed in terms of improving sense of school safety for ethnic minority students.

As the school population is becoming increasingly ethnically diverse in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), it is important to understand whether these demographic changes affect students' school-based social affiliations and perceptions of their school environments. Although many schools remain racially and ethnically segregated, today's "mixed" schools are often more ethnically diverse than ever before (Orfield & Lee, 2007). The question is whether the increased number of different ethnic groups may make schools more divisive and elevate students' sense of

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vulnerability or whether diversity can unite youth across racial and ethnic boundaries in ways that facilitate sense of safety and social connectedness.

Examining sense of safety in urban middle schools, Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham (2006) found that the ethnic diversity of the student body, both at the school and at the classroom level, was associated with stronger sense of safety among Black and Latino students. Specifically, greater diversity (i.e., a larger number of ethnic groups similar in size) was associated with reports of less peer victimization and loneliness, as well as higher ratings of school safety in 88 sixth-grade classrooms across 11 urban middle schools. The authors presumed that a greater balance of power (Oleweus, 1993) across many different groups contributes to sense of safety and social satisfaction at school among these two societal ethnic minority groups. The aforementioned findings might also be explained by students' personal friendships. Although students prefer same-ethnicity friends even in multiethnic schools (Baerveldt, van Duijn, Vermeij, & Hemert, 2004; Bellmore, Nishina, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2007; Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Lee, Howes, & Chamberlain, 2007; Moody, 2001; Quillian & Campbell, 2003), diverse environments provide increased opportunities for students to form cross-ethnic friendships. Social ties that cross racial or ethnic lines are, in turn, related to decreased prejudice among children (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Damico, Bell-Nathaniel, & Green, 1981; Pettigrew, 1997; Powers & Ellison, 1995). Moreover, research on college students demonstrates that cross-ethnic friendships are specifically related to reduced intergroup anxiety (Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). Assuming that cross-ethnic friendships can reduce intergroup anxiety also among school-age students, we expect that cross-ethnic friendships will be associated with greater sense of social-emotional safety (i.e., lack of threat and sense of connectedness) in multiethnic middle schools.

Research on elementary school students demonstrates that cross-ethnic friendships are associated with positive social adjustment (Hunter & Elias, 2000; Kawabata & Crick, 2008; Lease & Blake, 2005). Comparing numerical majority students with and without a numerical minority friend, Lease and Blake (2005) showed that ethnic majority students (either Black or White) with a minority friend were generally better at listening to others, more liked by their peers, and more socially satisfied than those who did not have any cross-ethnic ties in Grades 4–6. Kawabata and Crick (2008), in turn, found that, when controlling for classroom ethnic composition, reciprocated cross-ethnic friendships were associated with socially inclusive behaviors and greater leadership skills within a predominately Black and White fourth-grade sample. Whereas the analyses by Lease and Blake

(2005) revealed some differences between Black boys and the other three groups (Black girls, and White girls and boys), little is known about possible moderator effects of ethnicity.

When examining the association between cross-ethnic friendships and sense of social-emotional safety in school, it is not clear whether the same interpersonal mechanisms apply to both societal (or numerical) majority and minority students. Friendships that cross ethnic lines might be particularly important in reducing intergroup anxiety and concerns about discrimination among ethnic minorities (see Plant, 2004; Plant & Devine, 2003). Consistent with this view, Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould (2008) found that, although sensitivity to race-based exclusion was related to lack of institutional belonging and satisfaction among Black students in a predominantly White university (and among Latino but not White students in an ethnically diverse university), cross-ethnic friendships buffered this effect. These findings suggest that cross-ethnic friendships are especially beneficial for students who might feel stigmatized or excluded based on their racial or ethnic background. Hence, cross-ethnic friendships are likely to be related to sense of social-emotional safety among ethnic minorities but not among ethnic majority students.

While there are good conceptual reasons to expect that among ethnic minority youth cross-ethnic friendships are associated with feelings of safety at school, the role of *same*-ethnicity friendships should also be explored. After all, a greater number of relationships with in-group members is likely to make youth feel more secure about who they are in terms of their social or ethnic identity (Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Hamm, 2000; Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and a stronger sense of ethnic identity is related to higher self-esteem (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Umaña-Taylor, 2004). However, social identities boosted by relationships with in-group members are unlikely to facilitate feelings of safety in ethnically mixed schools. If lack of safety is at least partly due to intergroup divisions or threat from out-group members in a multiethnic school, then friendships that do not cross ethnic lines are unlikely to alleviate such concerns. It is nevertheless important to test this assumption.

The Present Study

The main goal of this study is to examine whether the number of cross-ethnic (versus same-ethnic) friendship choices in the fall of the school year is related to greater sense of social-emotional safety concurrently and across the school year among students in a multiethnic urban middle

school. We focus on middle grades (6–7) because little is known about cross-ethnic friendships during this potentially formative developmental period compared to elementary school or college years. We chose a school in which Latino and White students represent the two majority groups with similar proportions. Hence, the relative size of the groups is not a confound in our comparisons between a societal majority and minority group.

We first examine group differences in sense of safety and number of cross-ethnic (and same-ethnic) friendship choices. Competing hypotheses can be posed on the relative sense of safety of the two groups. Based on their societal minority status (i.e., greater likelihood for discrimination), Latino students may feel less safe in school than do their White peers. However, given the numerical representation of the two groups in the school, they may not differ from each other. Based on the similarity attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954) and in line with prior findings (e.g., Baerveldt et al., 2004; Mouw & Entwisle, 2006; Quillian & Campbell, 2003), we expect both ethnic groups to demonstrate a greater preference for same-ethnicity friends than for cross-ethnicity friends. Regarding our main goal, we hypothesize that compared to same-ethnic friendship choices, cross-ethnic friendship choices matter more in terms of sense of safety. Specifically, greater numbers of cross-ethnic (but not same-ethnic) friendship nominations were expected to be positively related to concurrent and subsequent reports of social-emotional safety for Latino students.

In sum, the current study expands on previous research in four main ways. First, extending research documenting the link between cross-ethnic friendships and intergroup attitudes (e.g., Aboud et al., 2003; Damico et al., 1981; Powers & Ellison, 1995) and social competencies (Hunter & Elias, 2000; Kawabata & Crick, 2008; Lease & Blake, 2005), we examine the relation between cross-ethnic friendship choices and sense of social-emotional safety. A sense of safety is fundamental to students, not only because it is related to psychosocial adjustment (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005), but also because it is associated with school functioning both concurrently and over time (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). Second, we extend past analyses by comparing a societal ethnic minority (Latino) group to a majority (White) group in a school where their numerical representation is similar. Third, we focus on a middle school not only because cross-ethnic friendships have been least studied during this developmental phase, but also because opportunities for cross-ethnic friendships are likely to increase as several elementary schools (that are likely to be less diverse) feed into one much larger middle school. Fourth, we expand on prior research that examines

the concurrent psychosocial correlates of cross-ethnic friendships by analyzing the associations between cross-ethnic friendship choices and sense of social-emotional safety also over time. The longitudinal analyses provide some insights into whether cross-ethnic friendships in the fall might have any lasting associations with sense of safety by the end of the school year.

Method

Procedure

Data for this study were collected in the greater Los Angeles area at an urban public middle school. This school was selected because of its ethnic composition: Latino (47%) and White (34%) students were the two largest groups, with similar representation. All sixth- and seventh-grade students of this middle school were invited to take part in the study. After teachers of the advisory classes (i.e., 20-minute nonacademic periods used for data collection) agreed to participate, parents were asked to consent for their children to participate in the study. For sixth grade, 65% of the parents returned the consent form, with 91% granting permission for their child to participate in the study, and, for seventh grade, 58% returned the consent form, with 89% granting permission.

All students with parental consent agreed to complete paper-and-pencil questionnaires in their classroom setting in the fall (Wave 1) and spring (Wave 2) of the school year for this short-term longitudinal study. Overall attrition at Wave 2 was 8% (8% among Whites and 7% among Latinos). This did not significantly change the ethnic distribution of the sample, $\chi^2(5, n = 302) = 0.36, p > .01$. Attrition analyses among the Latinos and White sample showed that sense of social-emotional safety, $F(1, 232) = .73, p > .05$, the number of cross-ethnic friendships, $F(1, 232) = .17, p > .05$, and same-ethnic friendships, $F(1, 232) = 3.51, p > .05$, at Wave 1 did not differ significantly between students who did and students who did not participate in the study at Wave 2.

Analysis Sample

Of the 328 students who took part in the study 39% were Latino, 30% White, 9% Black, 5% Asian, 4% other, and 12% mixed or multiethnic (and 1% missing). The ethnic breakdown of the sample approximates the official school statistics (47% Latino, 34% White, 13% Black, 3% Asian, and 3% other; California Department of Education, 2010). Although our analyses

focus on Latino ($n = 129$) and White ($n = 98$) students, the multiethnic context of the school was considered in our analyses. That is, we included friendship nominations given to Black ($n = 30$), Asian ($n = 18$), and the category "other" ($n = 12$). Only nominations given to students who reported multiple ethnicities ($n = 39$), and two respondents who did not report their ethnicity, were excluded, because we could not determine whether their friendships choices were same- or cross-ethnic.

Of the Latino and White students ($n = 227$), participants who completed questionnaires in both waves were included in the analyses. This resulted in 124 sixth-grade students ($M_{\text{age}} = 11.13$) and 103 seventh-grade students ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.11$), of whom 54% were boys. Whereas the Latino group (64%) was larger than the White group (36%) in sixth grade, $\chi^2(1, n = 124) = 9.32, p = .002$, the size of the two groups at seventh grade (48% and 52%, respectively Latino and White) did not statistically differ from each other, $\chi^2(1, n = 103) = .09, p = .77$.

Measures

Friendship choices. Students nominated peers in their grade for several items. To measure the number of best friends in the fall, students were asked, "Who are your best friends in your grade?" To indicate who were their best friends, respondents were allowed to nominate up to seven same- or cross-gender peers. Friendships were coded by connecting the nominations to the ethnic (and gender) data of the nominator and the nominee. Of the nominations, 29% were cross-ethnic and only 9% were cross-gender. Same-ethnic friendship choices ranged from zero to five, and the number of cross-ethnic friendship choices ranged from zero to four.

We chose to examine friendships *choices* operationalized as peer nominations made by the participants rather than mutual nominations that are presumed to capture reciprocal friendships for two reasons. First, when predicting students' sense of social-emotional safety in school, the subjective views of friendships should matter as much as (and possibly even more so than) reciprocated nominations. The second reason was more pragmatic: Only 24% of all the friendship choices were reciprocated. Given our goal to further differentiate subjective perceptions of cross-ethnic and same-ethnicity friendships, most youth would have been excluded from the analyses of cross-ethnic ties. Although we report descriptive statistics on the same- and cross-ethnic friendship choices as raw scores for each ethnic group, for subsequent analyses (i.e., regressions) we rely on nomination scores that are standardized within each ethnic group and within the two grades to account for different availability of same- and cross-ethnic peers within each grade.

Sense of social-emotional safety. A 7-item scale was used to measure sense of social-emotional safety at school in the beginning (fall) and in the end (spring) of the school year. The first four of the following items were reverse coded: I feel unsafe in my school; Students at my school are prejudiced; I feel that others make fun of me; I worry about being teased; I feel valued and respected at school; I feel I belong in my school; Students at my school are kind and helpful. Participants responded on a scale from 1, *not at all*, to 5, *all the time*. Higher scores on the scale indicate greater social-emotional safety (Cronbach's alphas were .70 at fall and .73 at spring for Latinos, and .82 and .90 for Whites).

Demographic variables. Self-reported gender and ethnicity were included as background variables. Each of these variables was dummy coded: Boys and White students were used as the comparison groups (i.e., coded as zero).

Results

This is subdivided in two parts. First, we provide comparisons between Latino and White students' friendship choices in the fall of the school year and sense of safety both in the fall and the spring of the school year. Second, we present the findings regarding the relations between same- versus cross-ethnic friendships and concurrent as well as subsequent sense of social-emotional safety.

Latino and White Student Comparisons

Friendship nominations. Univariate analysis of variance showed that the total number of friends nominated did not differ between Latino and White students, $F(1, 226) = .21, p = .65$. The mean number of best-friend nominations that could be coded as either cross- or same-ethnic was 1.60 ($SD = 1.22$). In line with our expectations, a 2 (type of friendship) \times 2 (ethnicity) \times 2 (grade) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that students selected significantly more same-ethnic than cross-ethnic friends, $F(1, 225) = 43.54, p < .001$, as shown in Table 1. Latino and White students did not differ in the mean number of same-ethnic or cross-ethnic friendship nominations at either sixth grade or seventh grade. Further analyses of the cross-ethnic nominations (not displayed in Table 1) showed no significant difference in Latino students nominating White grademates ($M = .28$) vs. White students nominating Latino grademates ($M = .33$) in this school.

Sense of safety. To compare the Latino and White students in terms of sense of safety across fall and spring, 2 (ethnicity) \times 2 (grade) \times time (fall,

Table 1. Same- and cross-ethnic friendships across grades and ethnicities

| | Friendship choices | |
|---------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | Same-ethnicity <i>M (SD)</i> | Cross-ethnicity <i>M (SD)</i> |
| Grade 6 | | |
| White | 1.04 (1.13) | 0.49 (0.63) |
| Latino | 1.08 (1.01) | 0.56 (0.92) |
| Grade 7 | | |
| White | 1.28 (1.27) | 0.42 (0.60) |
| Latino | 1.06 (0.91) | 0.46 (0.79) |

Note. The number of same- versus cross-ethnic friendships did not differ significantly between the two grades or the two ethnic groups.

spring) mixed model ANOVAs were conducted. Only a significant main effect of ethnicity was obtained, $F(1, 209) = 4.81, p = .03$. Contrary to our expectations, Latino students felt safer than did White students during both fall and spring (see Table 2).

In sum, although Latino students reported feeling safer in school than their White schoolmates, there were no differences between the two ethnic groups in either cross-ethnic or same-ethnic friendship choices. The question then is whether the friendship choices are related to sense of social-emotional safety in a similar fashion among both Latino and White students.

Same- Versus Cross-ethnic Friendship Choices and Sense of Safety

The relations between the type of friendships in the fall and sense of social-emotional safety in the fall and the spring were analyzed via multiple regression analyses. It should be noted that, although the data were collected during nonacademic advisory periods, the class compositions varied across various periods. Hence, in this school, like in most middle schools in the United States, we could not identify a meaningful classroom level for the analyses. To account for the availability of same- and cross-ethnic peers, the absolute values of friendship nominations were standardized within each ethnic group and grade. In the regression model, the demographic variables were entered at Step 1, same- and cross-ethnic friendships were entered at Step 2, and the interaction terms between the friendship choices and ethnicity were included in the final step of the analyses to test whether ethnicity moderated the associations between cross-ethnic friendships and sense of social-emotional safety. (Interactions of cross-ethnic friendships

Table 2. Sense of social-emotional safety across time, grade, and ethnicities

| | Sense of social-emotional safety | |
|---------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Fall <i>M (SD)</i> | Spring <i>M (SD)</i> |
| Grade 6 | | |
| White | 3.87 (.64) ^b | 3.75 (.90) ^b |
| Latino | 3.93 (.65) ^b | 3.90 (.64) ^b |
| Grade 7 | | |
| White | 3.72 (.73) ^a | 3.72 (.74) ^b |
| Latino | 4.06 (.64) ^a | 3.95 (.64) ^b |

Note. Superscripts should be read by column and within grade. Values sharing superscript *a* differ significantly ($p < .05$), and values sharing superscript *b* do not significantly differ.

by gender, and by gender and ethnicity, were also explored. However, those interactions were not significant and were therefore left out of the final analyses.) The findings of final regression analyses are reported in Table 3.

Consistent with the previously reported descriptive findings, the regression findings in Table 3 show that Latino students rated their sense of social-emotional safety higher than did White students in the fall, $B = .23$, $p = .02$, and the spring $B = .22$, $p = .03$. Although neither the number of same-ethnic friendship choices nor the number of cross-ethnic choices were related to sense of safety in the fall or spring,¹ the interaction terms indicated differences in the effects of cross-ethnic friendships between the two ethnic groups. The interaction revealed that cross-ethnic friendships for Latino students were related to higher sense of safety both concurrently in the fall, $B = .24$, $p = .03$, and subsequently in the spring, $B = .27$, $p = .02$. Thus, support was found for our hypothesis that cross-ethnic friendships are related to greater sense of safety among Latino students but not among White students.

Based on the recommendations by Aiken and West (1991), we plotted the simple slopes of the relation between cross-ethnic friendships and sense of safety for the two groups to understand the ethnic group differences (see Figure 1). To ease interpretation of the coefficients in the plot, social-emotional safety was standardized to $M = 0$ and $SD = 1$. The regression analyses for the simple slopes of the relation between cross-ethnic friendships and sense of safety showed that only for Latinos was the slope

1. When controlling for the fall ratings of social-emotional safety, cross-ethnic friendship nominations did not predict sense of social-emotional safety in the spring. This finding is not surprising given the high stability ($r = .67$) of the safety ratings across the two time points.

| | Sense of safety | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------|----------|-----------|--------------|
| | Fall | | | Spring | | |
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | ΔR^2 | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | ΔR^2 |
| Step 1: Background variables | | | .02 | | | .02 |
| Constant (reference = White) | | | | | | |
| Latino | .23* | .09 | | .22* | .10 | |
| Gender | -.00 | .09 | | -.07 | .10 | |
| Grade at school | .04 | .09 | | .01 | .10 | |
| Step 2: Friendships | | | .01 | | | .01 |
| Same-ethnic friends | .04 | .04 | | -.01 | .05 | |
| Cross-ethnic friends | -.09 | .09 | | -.11 | .10 | |
| Step 3: Interaction | | | .02 | | | .02 |
| Cross-ethnic friends* Latino | .24* | .11 | | .27* | .12 | |

Note. * $p < .05$.

was significant in the fall, $B = .23$, $SE = .09$, $t(224) = 2.55$, $p = .01$, and the spring, $B = .22$, $SE = .09$, $t(214) = 2.42$, $p = .02$. Thus, the number of cross-ethnic friendships was related to increased sense of safety both concurrently and over time for Latino students only.

To understand this finding further, additional analyses with the Latino students were conducted to examine whether *any* cross-ethnic friendships or specifically friendships with White students were related to sense of safety. Latino students nominated significantly more White classmates than other ethnicity classmates as friends, $F(1, 127) = 4.17$, $p = .04$. This is not surprising given the greater availability of White peers. Yet, multiple regression analyses showed that cross-ethnic friendships specifically with White peers were significantly related to higher sense of safety by spring, $B = .13$, $SE = .06$, $t(122) = 2.15$, $p = .03$. This effect was only marginally significant during fall, $B = .11$, $SE = .06$, $t(126) = 1.92$, $p = .057$. These findings suggest that friendships with White students in the beginning of the school year were particularly important for the sense of safety of Latino youth by the end of the school year in this middle school.

Discussion

Much of the past research on cross-ethnic and interracial friendships has focused on conditions that promote or constrain the formation of such

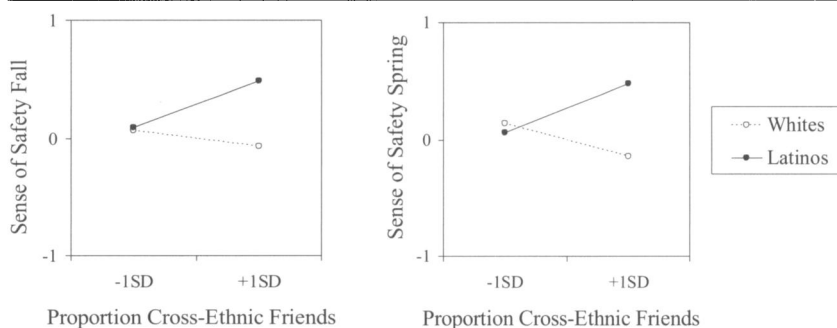


Figure 1. Proportion of cross-ethnic friendships predicting sense of social-emotional safety in the fall and spring among Latino and White students.

friendships (e.g., Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Hamm, Brown, & Heck, 2005; Moody, 2001) or on how interracial friendships are related to attitudes toward other ethnic groups (e.g., Aberson, Shoemaker, Tomolillo, 2004; Aboud et al., 2003; Powers & Ellison, 1995). A smaller body of developmental research documents that cross-ethnic friendships are associated with important social competencies in elementary school (Hunter & Elias, 2000; Lease & Blake, 2005; Kawabata & Crick, 2008). The current study builds on and complements these bodies of research on intergroup attitudes and social competencies. By focusing on perceptions of social-emotional safety in an urban middle school setting both concurrently and over time, the present findings provide new insights about the significance of cross-ethnic friends.

The specific demographic composition of the middle school in this study enabled us to compare the effects of a societal minority group (Latinos) and a societal majority group (Whites) in a setting where they comprised the two predominant groups. Drawing on previous research demonstrating that cross-ethnic friendships were related to more positive out-group attitudes (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), less intergroup anxiety (e.g., Levin et al., 2003), and better social adjustment (e.g., Kawabata & Crick, 2008), we found that cross-ethnic friendship choices were related to a stronger sense of social-emotional safety among Latino youth in the multiethnic school context. Based on the finding that cross-ethnic friendships can buffer the effect of race-based rejection sensitivity of minority-group students on institutional belonging and satisfaction among college students (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008), the current results further suggest how personal relationships are linked with lack of threat and sense of connectedness within the larger social collective.

Why are cross-ethnic friendship choices related to sense of social-emotional safety for Latino but not for White students? We presumed that cross-ethnic ties might be particularly important for societal minority students in alleviating a potential sense of discrimination or vulnerability. Consistent with this idea, the Latino students felt safer than did their White peers in this multiethnic school where they were one of the larger ethnic groups. Because the Latino and White students did not differ in terms of the number of cross-ethnic (or same-ethnic) friendships, the lower sense of safety among White youth cannot be attributed to lack of cross-ethnic ties (or to greater self-segregation). Thus, it is not just the quantity, but apparently also *the meaning*, of the friends from other ethnic groups that varies between Latino and White students in a multiethnic school.

In contrast to cross-ethnic friendships, same-ethnic friendship choices were unrelated to sense of social-emotional safety among both Latino and White students. This finding does not mean that same-ethnic friendships are unimportant. Several studies have shown that friendships in general improve social and emotional development (Hartup, 1996; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995) and in-group ties might be particularly important for validation of one's ethnic identity, cultural background (Phinney et al., 2001), and self-esteem (Phinney et al., 1997; Umaña-Taylor, 2004). However, the current findings suggest that in-group ties bear no relation to sense of social-emotional safety in a multiethnic school.

Neither Latino nor White students reported feeling more safe across the school year. One would expect that especially sixth-grade students would feel more comfortable (i.e., connected and less threatened) in their school by spring. One explanation for the absence of an increase in sense of safety is that sixth graders perceive behavioral problems (e.g., bullying) to increase over the school year (Galvan, Spatzier, & Juvonen, 2011; see also Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001). Therefore, elevated levels of disorderly behavior during spring may counter the effects of familiarity.

Although our analyses provide novel insights regarding the importance of cross-ethnic friendships, the study is limited in its scope: We examined friendships in only one middle school with a particular ethnic composition. Although the specific ethnic composition of the current study served our analyses, it is vital to assess the generalizability of our findings across different types of schools and across different ethnic groups. Not only do our main analyses comparing White and Latino students need to be replicated, but our additional analyses of specific cross-ethnic ties must be examined

across various groups and school ethnic composition. For example, given the ethnic composition of the school, we do not know whether Latino students' friendship choices with White classmates reflect their sense of equality stemming from the numerical representation of the school (i.e., that the two groups were the two largest and similar in size). Whether it is more important to form ties with members of any (other) majority group rather than members of the societal majority group is not clear.

Unlike most developmental research on cross-ethnic friendships (Lease & Blake, 2005; Kawabata & Crick, 2008), we relied on unidirectional friend nominations in this study. Our assumption was that subjective perceptions of (cross-ethnic) friendships are most meaningful when relating them to perceptions of the safety of the social environment. Because of the limited number of reciprocated nominations (due to the restricted number of nominations used to capture friendships), we could not test this assumption, however. Therefore, unidirectional and reciprocated friendship nominations should be compared in future research that relates friendships with perceptions of safety.

Finally, future studies with larger samples (i.e., more power) should also examine the causal links by relying on cross-lagged panel designs. Cross-lagged panel analyses would enable researchers to test the directionality of effects—that is, whether subjective perceptions of cross-ethnic ties foster a sense of safety or whether safe settings encourage formation of cross-ethnic ties. For the current study, the cross-lagged panel analyses would have required almost twice the size of the Latino group (Hoe, 2008; Hoelter, 1983). Thus, the directionality of effects needs to be tested with large samples.

Although research is needed to replicate current findings, our results are not only consistent with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), but they also may explain why Latino youth feel safer in more (as opposed to less) diverse educational settings (Juvonen et al., 2006). Subsequent studies should be designed to test whether cross-ethnic friendships mediate the relation between ethnic diversity and sense of social-emotional safety. Another interesting question for future research with larger samples is whether cross-ethnic friendships become more important for White students in schools or classrooms where they are one of the numerical minority groups.

Presuming that our results replicate across different samples, the findings have policy implications on how to improve sense of safety in multi-ethnic schools. Promoting cross-ethnic ties to make students feel safe is a vastly different approach to school safety than what most educators would normally consider. However, the mere presence of an ethnically diverse

student body may not result in cross-ethnic friendships especially if different ethnic groups are segregated by educational practices (e.g., academic tracking) in ways that highlight inequalities. Based on contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), equality and close contact among individuals representing different groups are important. The ideal conditions for inter-group acceptance may be created best by relying on cooperative practices (e.g., cooperative learning methods and extracurricular activities) where teachers encourage students of different ethnic backgrounds to work together toward common goals. Although it is probably impossible to abolish in-group favoritism, the value of relationships across groups may be attained best when students can contribute equally toward shared goals, such as when they play on the same sports teams, play instruments, sing, or act together in the same performance or when they work collaboratively on school projects.

In sum, this exploratory study suggests that ethnic diversity, which is often presumed to cause conflict within schools, can have benefits not only for how students relate to one another across ethnic groups, but also for the ways in which students feel at school over time. We believe that ethnic diversity provides opportunities for cross-ethnic friendships, which, in turn, are related to a better sense of social-emotional safety in school. Thus, by “taking advantage” of the ethnic diversity by forming (and maintaining) cross-ethnic friendships, at least some students can have a more positive school experience in large urban middle schools.

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